

"A Match Made in Heaven": Unique Collaboration Promotes Health and Wellness in DC

A new partnership between AU, Wesley Theological Seminary, and DC faith-based groups targets reducing obesity and the health equity gap in the District.

By Rebecca Basu | March 27, 2023



Pastor Wil Stroman aims to include fresh fruits and vegetables amid staples of canned goods and pasta in the weekly food drive offerings at Urban Outreach ministry in Southeast DC.

Collecting the produce is no easy task for Stroman, whose ministry resides in a food desert with few grocery stores and access to fresh foods.

“Our philosophy is taking care of your temple, which is the body that God has given us to fulfill His plan and purpose for our life,” Stroman said.

As he emphasizes healthier living, Stroman has found an AU program that complements his growing ministry.

AU's Faithfully Fit program trains volunteers to be health ministers and lead health promotion. Though health promotion programs are rare in faith-based organizations in the U.S., Stroman's belief in the connection between wellness and spirituality is one that experts are eager to tap.

"Health happens where people work, live, play—and worship," said Stacey Snelling, professor and chair of AU's Department of Health Studies and director of the CAS [Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities Lab](#). "Faith-based organizations are a cornerstone of the African American communities in Wards 7 and 8, and they have strong social support networks."

Community Health Administration at DC Health funded Faithfully Fit to help close the health equity gap in the District and tackle obesity. The mission matters because Wards 7 and 8 have the highest health disparities in the nation's capital. More than 70 percent of residents are obese, according to DC Health. High blood pressure is more common among African Americans than any other racial group in DC at more than 40 percent.

Snelling and Tom Pruski of Wesley Theological Seminary combined AU's research and health expertise with Wesley's [health minister](#) certificate program to form Faithfully Fit. Fifteen people in six faith-based organizations in the District became certified as health ministers, accentuating AU's commitment to working with Washington.

"Faith communities have a longstanding tradition of health and healing," said Pruski, who directs the program at Wesley. At some point, he said, "there was a cultural schism in terms of physical and spiritual health. The concept of the health minister is a way of reclaiming the connection between body, mind, and spirit."

Health ministers learn about behavioral change and how to build programs and tap resources in their community. They guide people toward healthy lifestyle changes such as taking a walk daily, managing stress, and eating a balanced meal. They may even advocate for accountability in nonprofit hospitals or help people navigate complex healthcare options.

"If I'm advising about a low-sodium diet, it's not just because I'm saying that," Stroman said. "Through Faithfully Fit, we're helping people to understand how to successfully manage diabetes or hypertension. The partnership is a match made in heaven."

With exercise and diet being two areas for improving health, the AU team worked with health ministers and congregations to assess needs. Church communities formed exercise groups to and held healthy cooking demonstrations. Nearly 2,500 people participated in Faithfully Fit initiatives.

"We don't dictate what health issue people want to address," Snelling explained. "If a group would like an exercise program, we can help deliver that. If another group wants

to focus on mental health, we can do that. We're trying to help people build that capacity long after we're gone."

Unlike behavioral changes such as smoking cessation, exercise and diet changes can be introduced slowly, Snelling explained.

"At that church fellowship, what are we serving? Is there an opportunity to serve fruit? We're not imposing that the doughnuts go, but maybe also incorporate fruit," she said.

With additional funding from DC Health, the work to promote health in the District continues. Stroman, Snelling's team, and another church from Faithfully Fit have started pop-up health literacy sessions at community gatherings.

A research paper published by Snelling in the *Journal of Religion and Health* describes the AU team's methods for working with faith groups to promote health. Snelling and her co-authors also call for funding health ministers and policy changes, such as greater grocery store access in food deserts.

"Future research should explore the success of programs across the country that seek to recognize the critical role health ministers play in congregations, communities, and public health. Steady funding for health minister positions needs to be identified to support this work," she and her co-authors write.

"As is the case for many programs focused on improving health, the difference between short-term success and lasting impact depends on empowering individuals to change behavior while also creating broader environmental and systems supports that build the capacity of communities to promote health."

Learn more about Wesley's [Health Minister Certificate](#).